

15 The Back Road to Soche Hill School

'Your mother is your mother, even if one of her legs is too short,' Malawians said, another old saw, and this was also their off-hand way of forgiving their country its lapses.

Most people didn't complain. Some people even boasted – 'Better roads,' many people said. Well, maybe so, here in the south, but Malawi was so poor only politicians had proper cars. They drove Mercedes-Benzes on these good roads while everyone else walked, or rode bikes, or herded their animals. Children used the main roads for playing games – the pavement was good for bouncing balls or tugging their home-made wire toys. As for buses, most of them were such a misery the good roads made little difference. I was so demoralized by my various bus trips from the far north that I had rented a car in Lilongwe. It was the first and last time on my whole trip I did so. Now I was the driver being hassled by police at the roadblocks.

'Open the boot, *bwana*,' ordered a heavily armed policeman at a barrier.

'What are you looking for?'

'Drugs and guns.'

'Do you ever find any of that stuff?' I asked.

Two of the policeman's helpers were rifling through my bag in the trunk, one inhaling deeply like a sniffer-dog smelling for ganja, or *chamba* as it was known in Malawi, a very inexpensive item that was widely available.

'Before this day ends we will find some,' the policeman said.

Apart from the roadblocks, the 200-mile trip to Zomba was a pleasure. I drove slowly, loving the freedom of my own vehicle and the starkness of the weirdly shaped mountains, each one of them standing alone on the green plain. I came to see them as specifically African, unique as the animals that grazed beneath them, for these Rift Valley boulders were scorched gray mountains, as though blown

out of the cannon's mouth of a volcanic crater in some fiery epoch of prehistory. Smooth and solitary, not quite buttes, not quite mesas, some of them were egg-shaped and some like exotic fruit. I was reminded of how I had felt when I had first seen them, the deep impression they had left was that I was in a special place, the dark star of Africa, and that traveling across other continents I never saw anything like them.

Paved roads ran where there had once been only rutted red clay tracks; the train line to Balaka that I had taken in 1964 to a Mua leprosarium by the lake was defunct – and so was the leper colony. The ferry at Liwonde across the Shire River, brimming and brown in flood, had been replaced by a bridge. All this was progress, but still on these new thoroughfares the Africans, buttocks showing in their tattered clothes, walked barefoot.

I traveled so idly, stopping so often to look at birds or talk to farmers, I did not arrive in the hill-town of Zomba until after dark. The main street was unlit, people flitting and stumbling in the dark. I had instructions to proceed to the Zomba Club and there to call my friend, who would meet me and guide me to his hard-to-find house high on the steep side of the plateau.

Zomba had been the capital of Malawi's British incarnation, the little tea-growing Protectorate of Nyasaland. The still small town was a collection of tin-roofed red-brick buildings clustered together at the edge of Zomba Plateau. From the main road, the plateau looked like an ironing board draped in a green sheet, and was high enough to be seen from a great distance – one of the peaks was well over 6000 feet. The craggy sides were misty and parts of the plateau still wild enough to support hyena packs and small bushbucks and some troops of monkeys and baboons. All the features of British rule had been imposed on the lower slopes in Zomba: the red-brick Governor-General's house, the red-brick Anglican church, the red-brick civil servants' bungalows, the red-brick club. The tin roofs of these buildings were now rusted the same hue as the bricks.

The Zomba Gymkhana Club had been the settlers' meeting place and social center in British times but, absurdly, membership was restricted according to pigmentation, whites predominating, a few

Indians, some golden-skinned mixed-raced people known then as 'Coloureds.' Even in the years just after Malawi's independence the club was nearly all white – horsey men and women, cricketers and rugger hearties. No footballers: kicking a football was regarded as an African sport.

Back then, I was not a member of any club, but was sometimes an unwilling party to rants by beer-swilling Brits wearing club blazers and cardigans ('This is my UK woolly') saying, 'Let Africans in here and they'll be tearing up the billiard table and getting drunk and bringing their snotty little piccanins in the bar. There'll be some African woman nursing her baby in the games room.' This was considered rude and racist, yet in its offensive way it was fairly prescient, for the rowdy teenagers at the billiard table were stabbing their cues at the torn felt, the bar was full of drunks (no children, though, and no one used the crude word 'piccanins' anymore), and a woman was breast-feeding her baby under the dart board. But if the fabric of the place had deteriorated, the atmosphere was about the same as before.

Some relics remained – the sets of kudu and springbok horns mounted high on the wall, the glass cases of dusty fishing flies, all neatly tied and categorized in rows, the biggest for salmon, the tiny midges for smaller fish. The calendar was months out of date, the portraits were gone, the floor was unswept, the overbright lights made the interior seem harsher and dirtier.

I sat drinking a beer, noting these observations, waiting for my friend to arrive.

Soon he came and greeted me warmly in two languages. He was David Rubadiri, whom I had first met in 1963, when he had been headmaster of my school, Soche Hill – *Sochay* was the correct way of saying it. The shortage of college graduates at independence meant that Rubadiri was plucked from the school and put into the diplomatic service. The prime minister, Hastings Banda, appointed him Malawi's ambassador to Washington. There, Rubadiri prospered until three or four months after independence, when there was a sudden power struggle. The cabinet ministers denounced Hastings Banda as a despot, attacked him verbally and held a vote of no-confidence in parliament. From a distance, Rubadiri joined in, but Banda survived what became

an attempted *coup d'état*, and he turned on his accusers. Those who had opposed him either left the country or fought in the guerrilla underground. Banda remained in power for the next thirty years.

Rubadiri was disgraced politically for taking sides, and lost his job in the coup attempt. He went to Uganda to teach at Makerere. After it became known that I assisted him – I delivered him his car, driving it 2000 miles through the bush to Uganda – I was accused of aiding the rebels and branded a revolutionary. I was deported from Malawi late in 1965, ejected from the Peace Corps ('You have jeopardized the whole program!'), and with Rubadiri's help, was hired at Makerere. One week I was a schoolteacher, the following week a university professor. The combination of physical risk, social activism, revolutionary fervor, Third World politics and naivete characterized this drama of the 1960s.*

So our careers, Rubadiri's and mine, had become intertwined. We had been friends for thirty-eight years. His fortunes had risen again with the change of government in Malawi. In the mid-nineties he was appointed Malawi's ambassador to the United Nations, and after four or five years, was made vice-chancellor of the University of Malawi. He had two wives and nine children and was now almost seventy, grizzled and dignified and venerable, like General Othello, a role he had played in a college production while studying in England. After a few drinks Rubadiri sometimes raised his hand and cocked an eyebrow, and said in a deep smoky voice,

*Soft you, a word or two before you go.
I have done the state some service . . .*

It was wonderful to see him again in the Zomba Gymkhana Club, still alive, a survivor from the distant past. Following his car through the narrow switchback road along the side of the Zomba Plateau – guard dogs and night watchmen darting out of the darkness – I had a glimpse of officialdom at home. These former residences of British bureaucrats were now the houses of African bureaucrats. Rubadiri's

* The whole grim story of my involvement is described in my essay 'The Killing of Hastings Banda,' in *Sunrise with Seamonsters*.

had been the British High Commissioner's house, a sprawling one-story colonial mansion (tin roof, brick and stucco walls) set into a steep slope, atop a terraced garden.

Only one of his wives was in residence – Gertrude, whom I had known as an intelligent and sensible person. She greeted me, welcomed me, and made me feel at home.

'Dinner is in one hour.'

'Time for you to talk to some students,' Rubadiri said.

We went downhill to the University Club, another glorified bar from the 1920s, and I spoke to a group of students and teachers – another pep talk. One man I recognized almost immediately as an old student of mine – the same chubby face and big head on narrow shoulders, the same solemn heavy-lidded eyes that made him look ironic. His hair was gray but otherwise he was Sam Mpechetula, now wearing shoes. I had last seen him when he was a barefoot fifteen-year-old, in gray shorts. He was now fifty-two, in a jacket and necktie.

Sam said he happened to be in Zomba and had heard I was speaking, so he showed up. He was married, a father of four, and a teacher at Bunda College, outside Lilongwe. So at least I could say that one of my students had taken my place as an English teacher in a Malawi classroom. That had been one of my more modest goals.

'Do you remember much about our school?' I asked.

'It was a good school – the best. They were the best days of my life,' he said. 'The Peace Corps guys were wonderful. They brought blue jeans and long hair to Malawi.'

'What a legacy,' I said, because Rubadiri was listening.

Sam said, 'They talked to Africans. Do you know, before they came, white people didn't talk to us.'

Rubadiri said, 'You remember this man, eh?'

'Oh, yes. When he was declared "PI" we were sad.'

PI was Prohibited Immigrant. My reward for helping Rubadiri.

'Around that time Jack Mapanje also taught us. You remember him?'

Another political casualty. Jack Mapanje was jailed for ten years for writing poems deemed by the Malawian government to be subversive.

Sam brought me up to date on the students I had taught – many were dead, some had left the country, but a number were working in

useful jobs in different parts of the country. A high proportion of these former students were working women.

Later that night, after dinner, I was reminded again of the strength and clear-sightedness of Malawian women when David Rubadiri went to bed and his wife stayed up, drinking tea and monologuing. Gertrude was a short solid woman, with a full face and powerful arms and she sat deep in the cushions of a sofa, leaning slightly forward, looking alert. She was intelligent and, for her generation, highly educated, having gone to Fort Hare University in South Africa. Robert Mugabe, later guerrilla fighter and erratic president of Zimbabwe, had been one of her classmates. We talked about him a little because that month he was harassing white farmers in Zimbabwe so severely people were warning me to stay away from that country.

'Mugabe was so studious – we called him "Bookworm."'

Fearful of offering an insult, for I was a houseguest, I at first tentatively suggested that on my return to Malawi I was seeing a country greatly reduced. But Gertrude seized on this, for she too had been away for a long time – perhaps twenty-five years.

'Things are worse,' Gertrude said decisively. 'When I came back in 1994 I was surprised. The poverty here really shocked me. I could not believe the people could be so poor. I saw a boy with some small money in his hand trying to buy some soap – he needed one *kwacha* [1.3 cents] but didn't have it, and so he went away. The people were dressed in rags. The streets were littered with rubbish.'

'I've noticed that myself,' I said.

'But do you know? Within two weeks I had stopped seeing it!'

'What else shocked you when you came back?'

'The way the young people spoke in the house really bothered me. Some of them were my own nephews. If I asked a question they would answer with a question, sometimes saying "*Si chapita?*" [So what?] That is not traditional at all – it shows no respect. I might ask for sugar and the child would just shrug and sit there and say, *Si watha?* [Isn't it all gone?] Shocking!'

'And the way people gossip. Well, you know this has always been an envious society. Someone comes from abroad with a Ph.D. and we say it stands for "Pull him down." They gossip about the person

and say he or she is proud. I was at a funeral recently and heard people gossiping. Can you imagine – at a funeral?

'We have become so dirty – in throwing garbage on the street. Also, personally. People are less clean in their personal habits. You notice it on buses. The smell. And you see how people push? They never did that before. It is not part of our culture to be in a crowd or to press against each other. Our culture determines that we need space. A servant gives you space – he stands aside. People do the same with each other. So it is unnatural to be pushed and pressed, yet it happens all the time. No one respects old people. No one gives me a seat. Maybe I am saying that because I am old!

'What went wrong? Is it because of all those years of Banda's rule, telling people what to do, to be tidy, to be respectful? And now they say, "The old man is gone. Now I can be messy, to make up for all those years."'

'The foreign charities here are doing our work for us – so many of them! What progress are they making? Will we have them for ever? There were not so many before. Why do we still need them after so long? David says I am a pessimist, but to tell the truth I am a bit ashamed.'

I went to bed thinking, So I'm not imagining this.

I set off the next morning to revisit my school, forty-five miles down the road from Zomba to Soche Hill.

Some trips mean so much to us that we rehearse them obsessively in our head, not to prepare ourselves but in anticipation, for the delicious foretaste. I had been imagining this return trip down the narrow track to Soche Hill for many years. It was a homecoming in a more profound sense than my going back to Medford, Massachusetts, where I had grown up. In Medford, I was one of many people struggling to leave, to start my life; but in Malawi, at Soche Hill School, I was alone, making my life.

In Africa, for the first time, I got a glimpse of the sort of pattern my life would take – that it would be dominated by writing and solitariness and risk and, already, in my early twenties I tasted those ambiguous pleasures. I had learned what many others had discovered before me, that Africa for all its perils represented wilderness and possibility. Not

only did I have the freedom to write in Africa, I had something new to write about.

The African world I got to know was not the narrow existence of the tourist or big-game hunter, or the rarified and misleading experience of the diplomat, but the more revealing progress of an ambitious exile in the bush. I had no money and no status. In Malawi I began identifying with Rimbaud and Graham Greene, and it was in Africa that I began my lifelong dislike of Ernest Hemingway, from his shotguns to his mannered prose. Ernest was both a tourist and a big-game hunter. The Hemingway vision of Africa begins and ends with the killing of large animals, so that their heads may be displayed to impress visitors with your prowess. That kind of safari is easily come by. You pay your money and you are shown elephants and leopards. You talk to servile Africans, who are generic natives, little more than obedient Oompas. The human side of Africa is an afternoon visit to a colorful village. This is why, of all the sorts of travel available in Africa, the easiest to find and the most misleading is the Hemingway experience. In some respects the feed-the-people obsession that fuels some charities is related to this, for I seldom saw relief workers that did not in some way remind me of people herding animals and throwing food to them, much as rangers did to the animals in drought-stricken game parks.

The school-teaching experience in Africa, harder to come by, takes less money but more humility. I had been lucky. Fearing the draft, I had joined the Peace Corps, in one of the earliest waves of volunteers, and been sent to Nyasaland, an African country not yet independent. So I experienced the last gasp of British colonialism, the in-between period of uncertain changeover, and the hopeful assertion of black rule. That was lucky, too, for I saw this process at close quarters, and African rule, necessary as it was, was also a tyranny in Malawi from day one.

School teaching was perfect for understanding how people lived and what they wanted for themselves. And my work justified my existence in Africa. I had never wanted to be a tourist. I wished to be far away, as remote as possible, among people I could talk to. I achieved that in Malawi. What I loved most about Africa was that it seemed unfinished, and was still somewhat unknown and undiscovered, lying

mute but imposing, like the giant obelisk in the quarry at Aswan. The beautiful flawed thing lay trapped in the rock, but if erected it would have risen 150 feet. It was for me the very symbol of the Africa I knew.

What I liked then was what I still liked, village life, and tenacious people, and saddleback mountains of stone and flat plains where anthills were higher than any hut. The road from Zomba had everything – vistas almost to Mozambique, the savanna of scattered trees, small villages, roadside stands where people sold potatoes and sugar cane – famine food, for the maize was not yet harvested. I liked the sweet somnolence of rural Africa, which I always regarded with a sense of safety.

Instead of driving straight to the school I stopped at the nearby town of Limbe, which began abruptly, the edge of the town slummy, with the outdoor businesses – bicycle menders, car repairers, coffin-makers; the rest of it chaotic, litter and mobs, small businesses and shop houses, and a proliferation of bars and dubious-looking clinics. I drove around looking for landmarks and found a bar where I used to drink, the Coconut Grove; and the Limbe market; and the Rainbow Theater, where we had to stand while they played 'God Save the Queen' before every movie performance, until independence.

The countryside had seemed emptier than before, the town was much fuller – larger and meaner-looking. I parked my car and went into a bank to get a cash advance on my credit card.

The clerk said, 'This transaction will take three days.'

An African behind me in line sighed on my behalf and said, 'That should take no more than an hour. That's disgusting.'

I abandoned the thought of getting money and talked to the man instead. He was a Malawian, Dr Jonathan Banda, a political science teacher at Georgetown. He had left Malawi while quite young, in 1974, had traveled and studied in various countries but had finished his Ph.D. in the United States. He had just come back to Malawi and he was disappointed by what he saw.

'It is dirty – it's awful,' he said.

We were standing on the main street of Limbe, among the crowds of people. Jonathan Banda was hardly forty, and having lived so long

abroad he was better fed, and so bigger and stronger than any of his fellow Malawians. He had the look of an athlete, the same confidence that is also a sort of muscularity and an upright, assertive way of standing, and his posture matched his skeptical smile.

'The people are greedy and materialistic,' he went on. 'They're lazy, too. They show no respect. They push and shove. They are awful to each other.'

'What are you doing here?'

'Seeing my family, but also I wanted to come back to teach. I was recently interviewed by the university.'

I listened closely – after all, I was staying at the house of the university's vice-chancellor.

'So what happened?'

'I was questioned by a panel of officials. They asked me about my political views. Can you imagine? If I were teaching science or geography, no problem. But my field is political science. I said, "I have no specific party affiliation."'

'What did they say to that?'

'They didn't like it. I said, "I want to teach my students to make up their own minds – to form political ideas of their own. That's what matters most to me." They looked at each other and one said, "We can't pay you much."'

'I'm sure it would be less than Georgetown,' I said.

'I don't care. I said to them, "That's fine with me. I am here to learn."'

But Dr Jonathan Banda didn't get the job. He was sure the reasons for his being turned down were political. He said that if he had praised the government and the ruling party they would have hired him.

Thinking of what the ambassador had told me, I said, 'A diplomat told me there is no political terror here anymore. Is that true?'

'Maybe, but there is political pressure of a very insidious sort.'

He seemed so outspoken I asked him the questions about charities and aid agencies that had been nagging at me, the agents of virtue in white Land-Rovers – what were they changing?

'Not much – because all aid is political,' he said. 'When this country became independent it had very few institutions. It still doesn't have

many. The donors aren't contributing to development. They maintain the status quo. Politicians love that, because they hate change. The tyrants love aid. Aid helps them stay in power and it contributes to underdevelopment. It's not social or cultural and it certainly isn't economic. Aid is one of the main reasons for underdevelopment in Africa.'

'You said it, I didn't,' I said. 'There's an awful lot of aid agencies here.'

'All those vehicles – everywhere you look,' he said, which is precisely what I had felt.

'So how will things change for the better?'

He said, 'Change will involve all the old men dying off. Or it might take another forty years.'

'What if all the donors just went away?'

'That might work.'

I wished him luck and walked up the main street to confirm an old memory, to see if the Malawi Censorship Board was still operating as normal. Indeed it was, still a government office in its own substantial building at the east end of town. The offices were heavily staffed, all the names listed on a board in the lobby – Executive Director, Assistant Director, Accountant, Typing Pool, Screening Room Technician, and so forth – about thirty people altogether.

I knocked on a door at random and found an African man in a pin-stripe suit sitting at a desk, a Bible open at his elbow – but otherwise a tidy desk.

'Excuse me, do you have an updated list?' Not sure of what I was asking for, I was deliberately vague.

'I can sell you this,' he said, and handed me a pamphlet titled *Catalogue of Banned Publications, Cinematograph Pictures and Records, with Supplement*, dated 1991. 'Please give me five kwacha.'

He straightened his tie. He then opened a ledger labeled *Accounts Section Censorship Board* and laboriously filled out a lengthy receipt in triplicate, stamped it, and tore out a copy for me. All this work for six cents.

'Don't you have anything more recent than 1991?'

'I will check. What is your interest?'

'I want to write something about censorship,' I said. 'I'm studying the problem.'

'Please wait here. I will need your name.'

I wrote my name on a piece of paper and he took it and left the room. While he was gone I looked around – lots of uplifting mottoes on the office walls, a portrait of the president, Mr Muluzi, some religious tracts on a bookshelf. The man's Bible was open to the Book of Ezekiel, the hellfire chapters of punishment, 'Threats against sinners,' in its denunciations a sort of mission statement for the Malawi Censorship Board, but containing a great deal of explicit imagery that might have been deemed unfit for Malawian readers. Ezekiel 23:20: 'Oholibah . . . surpassed her sister in lust . . . and played the whore over and over again. She was infatuated with their male prostitutes, whose members were like those of donkeys and whose seed came in floods like that of stallions.'

The paradox was that this Malawian catalogue of banned books would have constituted a first-year college reading list in any enlightened country. Flipping through the pamphlet I saw that it contained novels by John Updike, Graham Greene, Bernard Malamud, Norman Mailer, Yukio Mishima, D. H. Lawrence, James Baldwin, Kurt Vonnegut, Vladimir Nabokov and George Orwell. *Animal Farm* was banned, as well as – more predictably – many books with titles such as *Promiscuous Pauline* and *School Girl Sex*. Salman Rushdie's name was on the list – the president was a Muslim, that could explain it; and so was my name – after all these years, my novel *Jungle Lovers*, set in Malawi, was still banned.

The censorship officer had not returned. It seemed to me that the wisest thing to do was leave the censorship board before they linked my name with that of the pernicious author in their list. I tiptoed out of the office, saw that the hall was empty, all the office doors closed, and hurried away as storm clouds gathered over the nearby hills.

In a fine, chilly and drifting mist known in Malawi as *chiperoni*, I drove out of Limbe by a familiar route: uphill through a forest that had once been much larger, past a village that had once been much smaller, on a paved road that had once been just a muddy track. My hopes were raised by this narrow but good back road that ascended

to the lower slopes of Soche Hill, for I assumed that this improved road indicated that the school too had been improved.

But I was wrong, the school was almost unrecognizable. What had been a set of school buildings in a large grove of trees was a semi-derelect compound of battered buildings in a muddy open field. The trees had been cut down, the grass was chest-high. At first glance the place was so poorly maintained as to seem abandoned: broken windows, doors ajar, mildewed walls, gashes in the roofs, and just a few people standing around, empty-handed, doing nothing but gaping at me.

I walked to the house I had once lived in. The now-battered building had once lain behind hedges, in a bower of blossoming shrubs, but the shrubbery was gone, replaced by a small scrappy garden of withered maize and cassava at one corner. Tall elephant grass – symbol of the bush – had almost overwhelmed it and now pressed against the house. The building was scorched and patched, one sooty wall where the boiler fire was fed, and the veranda roof broken. Mats lay in the driveway, mounds of white flour drying on it – except that falling rain had begun to turn it to paste. Faggots of firewood had been thrown in a higgledy-piggledy stack outside the kitchen.

To someone unfamiliar with Africa the house was the very picture of disorder. I knew better. A transformation had occurred, an English chalet-bungalow turned into a serviceable African hut, not a very colorful hut, even an unlovely hut. But it was not for me to blame the occupants for finding other uses for the driveway, or chopping the trees up for firewood, or slashing the hedges, or growing cassava where I had grown petunias. I did regret that the paint had peeled from the trim and the eaves, that the wood had rotted and brickwork had cracked and the windows had slipped from their frames. Village huts were kept in better repair. It would not be long before this badly maintained dwelling would fall down.

'Yes, you are looking for someone?'

The occupant of what had been my house stepped out, barefoot, in stained trousers and an undershirt, dabbing at the floury scraps on his cheeks. He had been eating.

'No. Just passing by,' I said. 'I used to live here. In the sixties.'

'A long time ago,' he said.

That remark fascinated me, for thirty-five years did not seem long at all to me, and in the heart of ancient changeless Africa it seemed nothing. But it was before he was born. The man did not introduce himself or welcome me, which was unusually inhospitable here. He didn't ask why I might have lived in the house, or inquire what I had done there all those years ago. He licked food from his lips and folded his arms. He was just a village man eating a village meal in his village hut, and I was an interruption, from another planet.

'It's a very old house,' he said. He turned to examine it.

'Not really.'

'Built around independence time,' he said, as though pegging it to some remote period in the past.

Independence was 1964. But in a place where people married young, bore children young, and died young, that was two generations, far off to him in African time.

The old Roseveare homestead next door, much larger, was in worse shape. To those two meticulous English green-fingered gardeners, unweeded plants were a nightmare. But this was transformation, too. There was a solid maize crop growing where their roses and lupins had been. This vividly illustrated African life, which was the story not of adaptation but of survival.

'The Roseveares used to live there.'

'Myself, I am not knowing them.'

'Sir Martin Roseveare founded this school. He and his wife taught here for many years.'

The man shrugged: not a clue.

'They are dead now.'

'Oh, sorry.' But he seemed more suspicious than sorry, as though I was spinning a yarn to take him off guard and perhaps rob him.

'You're a teacher?'

'Communications and what-not,' he said.

'Thanks. I must be going.'

'Bye-bye, mister.'

More rain-stained mildewed walls and sagging roofs, more broken windows and cracked verandas up the road, at the other teachers'

houses. The drizzle was coming down hard now, but the rain and the mud and the dripping trees and the green slime on the brick walls were appropriate to the melancholy I felt.

I met two teachers standing in the wet road, chatting together. They introduced themselves as Anne Holt from Fife in Scotland, and Jackson Yekha, a Malawian – new teachers here.

‘I’ve read some of your books,’ Anne said. ‘I didn’t know you’d taught here.’

‘It was a while ago. Ever hear of the Rosevears? They actually started the school. They lived over there.’

Nothing, no memory of them, and I began to think that the weeds that had covered their graves in Mzuzu were an accurate reflection of how much their decades of work and sacrifice mattered. It was as though they had never existed, or were just ghostly figures. What they had helped create was almost gone, so in a sense they might never have come, though they still haunted the school.

And I was a specter, too: a wraith from the past, knocking on broken windows with my bony fingers, pressing my skull against the glass and looking death’s head toothy, and saying, *Remember me?* But I was so obscure and insubstantial a spook I was hardly visible to these people, though I saw them clearly as a repetition, another cycle, a sadder incarnation than before. Anne Holt was twenty-two, as I had been here at Soche Hill, and so as a ghost I was visiting and haunting my earlier self, and seeing myself as I had been: thin, pale, standing on a wet road in the bush, with a foxed and mildewed textbook in my hand.

As we were talking the rain turned very heavy, smacking the leaves overhead and threatening to drench us. We sheltered in the nearest house, that of Jackson Yekha. It so happened that Jackson’s house was also the first one I had ever occupied in Malawi. While my house was being finished, I stayed in this one, belonging to a hard-working Scottish teacher from the island of South Uist. He was John MacKinnon, a stalwart at the school, and another forgotten man. The same dining table that had once held sauce bottles and the mustard pot and a sticky jar of Branston Pickle was now dusted with the talcum of maize flour

from *nsima* spills. This house too had become bush-like and cluttered and scorched: bungalow into hut.

Sitting there, listening to the rain hammering on the roof, it was Jackson Yekha, not I, who bemoaned the poverty and disorder in the country.

I said, ‘When I was here, people used to say, “In five or ten years things will improve.”’

I didn’t have to finish the thought, for Jackson said, ‘Things are terrible. What can we do to change?’

I said, ‘First you have to decide what’s important to you. What do you want?’

‘I want things to be better. Houses. Money. The life.’

‘What’s stopping you?’

‘The government is not helping us.’

‘Maybe the government wants to prevent things from becoming better.’

I sketched out my theory that some governments in Africa depended on underdevelopment to survive – bad schools, poor communications, a feeble press and ragged people. They needed poverty to obtain foreign aid, they needed ignorance and uneducated and passive people to keep themselves in office for decades. A great education system in an open society would produce rivals, competitors, and an effective opposition to people who wanted only to cling to power. It was heresy to say such things, but this was how it seemed to me.

‘That’s so depressing,’ Anne said. ‘But no one wants to be a teacher. A primary school teacher only makes 2000 *kwacha* a month. The college level is about 5000 *kwacha*.’

These figures represented about \$25 to \$65 – very low, but the average annual per capita income in Malawi was \$200.

‘The NGOs pull out the teachers,’ Jackson said. ‘They offer them better pay and conditions.’

That was interesting – the foreign charities and virtue activists, aiming to improve matters, co-opted underpaid teachers, turned them into food distributors in white Land-Rovers, and left the schools understaffed.

Seeing that the rain had let up I asked Anne to show me around the school. In the main office, I met the principal.

Anne said, 'This is Mr Theroux. He used to teach here.'

The principal shortened his neck like a surprised turtle and glanced at me. He said, 'That's interesting,' and returned to his scribbling.

The library, a large substantial building, had been the heart of the school. It had never been difficult to get crates of new books from overseas agencies. My memory of the Soche library was an open-plan room divided with many high bookcases and filled shelves, 10,000 books, a table of magazines, a reference section with encyclopedias.

The library was almost in total darkness. One light burned. Nearly all the shelves were empty. The light fixtures were empty too.

'It's a little dark in here.'

'You should have seen it before,' Anne said. 'At least we've got that one light. We've asked the ministry countless times to send us fluorescent bulbs but they don't even reply to our letters.'

'You're asking for bulbs and they won't give them to you?' I said. 'I think they're sending you a message, that they don't care.'

'Aye, possibly.'

'This used to be one of the best schools in the country.'

'Aye, it's sad, I agree.'

'What happened to the books?'

'Students stole them.'

'Good God.'

'We're trying to work out a new system. When we get it up and running we'll be able to prevent a lot of the theft.'

I thought: I will never send another book to this country. I also thought: If you're an African student and you need money, it made a certain criminal sense to steal books and sell them. It was a justifiable form of poaching, like a villager snaring a warthog, disapproved of by the authorities but perhaps necessary – there was no tribal sanction against poaching when it concerned survival.

Leaving the Soche library I felt as though I was emerging from a dark hole of ignorance and plunder. We walked across to the classrooms, which were as seedy as everything else, but in some respects worse, for the verandas had not been swept and the grass had not

been cut, and there was litter on the paths. What excuse was there for that?

'There's a serious money shortage in this country,' Anne said.

'That's probably true,' I said. 'But how much does a broom cost? The students could sweep this place and cut the grass. I don't think it's a money problem. I think it's something more serious. No one cares. You're here to do the work, and you're willing, so why should anyone help?'

'I'm not just teaching,' she said. 'I'm learning a lot.'

'Absolutely – that's a good reason to be here,' I said. 'That's why I liked being here.'

We walked through the building to the schoolyard, where some students lingered, watching us. This field was where morning assembly was held, a bigger space than I had known, but now paved with cinders and bordered by more unswept and damp-stained classroom blocks. A stout confident-looking woman in a green dress stepped out from a classroom, where she had obviously been eating, for she was licking her fingers. The headmistress.

'This is Mr Theroux. He used to teach here.'

'Thank you. That's interesting.'

Still with her fingers in her mouth, the headmistress returned to the classroom, to her meal.

Anne and I walked on to the assembly ground. I looked around the dismal school and thought how I had longed to return here. I had planned to spend a week helping, perhaps teaching, reliving my days as a volunteer. This was my Africa. *You're planting a seed!* some people had said. But the seed had not sprouted and now it was decayed and probably moribund.

Perhaps reading my thoughts, Anne said, 'I have my doubts sometimes. I say to my mother, "What if we just upped and left? All of us. Every last one."'

'What do you think would happen?'

'Then the people here would have to think for themselves. They'd have to decide what's best for them – what they want. No one would influence them. Maybe they would say they wanted education – and they'd have to do the teaching. They'd have to do what we're doing.'

'For your measly salary.'

'Right,' she said. 'Or maybe they'd decide that they wouldn't want a change. They might allow things to stay as they are. Lots of the people in villages are fine – they're not miserable.'

These serious questions from someone who was willing to work – the person I had been – gave me hope. Not enough Africans were asking the same questions.

I wanted to see some African volunteers – caring for the place, sweeping the floor, cutting grass, washing windows, gluing the spines back on to the few remaining books, scrubbing the slime off the classroom walls. Or, if that was not their choice, I wanted to see them torching the place and burning it to the ground, and dancing around the flames; then plowing everything under and planting food crops. Until either of those things happened I would not be back. I felt no desire to linger, and certainly none to work here. I wished Anne Holt lots of luck and I left the place in her hands, feeling that I would never be back, that this was my last safari here.

I did not know the answer; I didn't even know the question. A kind of clarity came to me: I saw the pointlessness, almost triviality, of my staying and attempting to do some teaching. That effort would have been something purely to please myself. I did not feel despair at having been prevented from doing it, but rather a solemn sense that since only Africans could define their problems, only Africans could fix them.

And maybe none of these flawed schools was the problem, but only foreign institutions like foreign contraptions – like the big metal containers that were sent full of machinery or computers that were distributed and used for a while, then broke and were never fixed. I saw them all over Africa, the cast-off container at the edge of town. Whatever their contents might have been, what remained as the most valuable object was the metal container itself. The empty things became sturdy dwellings, and there were always people or animals living in them, like credulous corrupted tribesmen in a cargo cult.

On my way back to Zomba I drove to Blantyre (named for David Livingstone's birthplace in Scotland) and stopped at a shop on a side street, Supreme Furnishers, to see another of my students, Steve

Kamwendo. Steve was now branch manager, aged fifty-one, father of six, a big healthy man with the powerful features and chiefly presence of Vernon Jordan, Bill Clinton's expert in damage control. He hugged me and said he was glad to see me. I told him where I had been. His face fell.

'You went to Soche?' he said. 'Did you shed tears?'

That summed it up. Anyone who felt I had been too hard on my old school I could send to Steve, who lamented that the school was in a bad way, that crime was terrible and life in general very hard. His own business was good. Malawian-made furniture, and bedsteads and lamps from South Africa and Zimbabwe were popular, because furniture imported from outside Africa was so expensive.

'Your old students are doing well, but the country is not doing well. People are different – much poorer, not respectful.'

'What about your kids, Steve?'

'They are in America – four of them are in college in Indiana. One is graduating in June.'

By any standards, Steve's was a success story. All his savings went towards educating his children elsewhere and, though he was gloomy about Malawi's prospects, he was encouraging his children to return to the country to work.

'It's up to them now,' I said.

I returned to Zomba sooner than I had expected, with an unanswered question in my mind. Why were the schools so underfunded?

'I can tell you that,' Gertrude Rubadiri said, her feet squarely on the ground as usual. 'The money was taken.'

It seemed that two million American dollars, earmarked for education from a European donor country, had recently been embezzled by the finance minister and two other politicians in a scam that involved the creation of fictional schools and fictional teachers. More money was unaccounted for. The men were in jail, awaiting trial but the money was gone and would never be found.

So there was a good reason for the broken windows and dead lights and unpainted walls of the school at Soche and every other school in the country. A large and important part of the education budget had been stolen by the government official to whom it had been entrusted.

The next day the Rubadiris invited some friends for dinner. One man, very fat and self-possessed, had been a Malawian ambassador in Europe and was now a bureaucrat, living in Zomba.

'You have seen so much of the country, Paul! So, tell us, what do you think?'

'The visitor usually brings a sharp knife,' someone said – another proverb. The stranger was known for having the keenest perceptions.

I did not know where to begin, but for some reason I kept seeing in my mind the main road through the northern towns, the outposts of the plateaus – Karonga, Livingstonia, Rumphu, Ekwendeni, Mzuzu – the empty Indian shops, the women squatting on the ground, selling bananas and peanuts. I mentioned this vision of rural decline, but I didn't say decline, I said change.

'The Indians were chased away,' the former ambassador said. 'It wasn't a law, it wasn't Gazetted. But that is a detail. As soon as the president made the speech against the Indians – mid-seventies about – they closed their shops. The Indians went to the UK or South Africa.'

I knew this but I wanted to hear him say it. I went on, 'What was the motive behind the president's speech?'

'We wanted Africans to be given a chance to run the shops. So that Africans could go into business. The shops were handed over. I bought one myself!'

'With what result?'

'Ha-ha! Not much! It didn't work. They all got finished!'

He was saying: We kicked out the Indians, we took over their shops, we failed – so what? End of story. He even tried to change the subject, but I was interested and I asked him to describe the failure in a little more detail.

'Well, as you know, Indians are good at business,' he said. Then laughing in dismay as though he had just dropped a slice of bread butter-side down, 'What do we know about these things? We had no capital. The shops failed – almost all of them! Ha! They were abandoned, as you saw. And the rest were turned into *chibuku* [beer] bars.'

The result in the rural areas was: no shops at all, and twenty-seven years later, still no shops. So the whole scheme had backfired. When I pointed this out, one of the other African guests began, perversely,

denigrating the Indians for their business acumen in a mocking voice.

'They sit there, you see, and they have these little pieces of paper, and have these columns of numbers.' He spoke pompously about the Indians as though describing demented obsessional children with broken toys. 'And one Indian is running the calculator, and another is counting the sacks of flour and the tins of condensed milk. One-two-three. One-two-three.'

What this educated African in his plummy voice intended as mockery – the apparent absurdity of all this counting – was the description of people doing a simple inventory of goods in a shop.

I said, 'But that's how a shop is run. That's normal business. You make a list of what you've sold, so you know what stuff to reorder.'

'Indians know no other life!' he said. 'Just this rather secluded life – all numbers and money and goods on shelves. One-two-three.'

'Record-keeping is the nature of small business, isn't it?' I resented his belittling the shopkeeper, yet I kept calm so as to draw him out. 'The profit margins are so small.'

'But we Africans are not raised in this way,' he said, nodding to the others for approval. 'What do we care about shops and counting? We have a much freer existence. We have no interest in this – shops are not our strong point.'

'Why close the shops then?'

'That stumped them, but not for long.'

'Maybe something can be done with them. Selling is not our heritage. We are not business people.'

'Women are selling soap and matches and cooking oil.'

'But not in shops.'

'No, they're sitting in the mud in Mzuzu,' I said, feeling agitated.

'I'll tell you why these shops didn't work out,' the former ambassador said. 'When Africans run businesses their families come and stay with them and eat all their food – just live off them. As soon as an African succeeds in something he has his family cadging from him. Not so?'

'That is true, brother,' the other man said.

'And we are not cut out for this shop-keeping and book-keeping and,' he winked at me, 'number crunching.'

I had never heard such bullshit. Well, perhaps I had and not

recognized it. The man was saying: *This is all too much for us. We cannot learn how to do business. We must be given money, we must be given sinécures, because we don't know how to make a profit.*

I said, 'If you're no good at book-keeping and keeping track of expenses, why do you expect donor countries to go on giving you money?'

This was a bit too blunt and it had the effect of ending this particular discussion.

Rubadiri the host said, as though to explain my irritation, 'Paul has had a very powerful experience, returning to his old school. That is why he was such a good teacher. It meant so much to him.'

Feeling patronized, I said, 'No lights. The place is falling down. They stole the books. I know what you're going to say, but – hey – why doesn't anyone sweep the dirty floor?'

'There is a panel, studying the education system.'

I thought: Oh, bollocks, and drank another beer and sat back in my chair while they talked about other things.

I did not hear what they were saying. I heard rats scurrying and squabbling in the space above the wooden ceiling of the old colonial house. The open window admitted lovely gossamer-winged dragonflies and yellow moths and big bumbling beetles.

The stout man was staring at me. I was at a loss for words. Finally, I said, 'Which country were you ambassador in?'

'Germany. Four years.'

'Lovely museums,' I said.

'I only went to a museum once,' he said. 'They gave a dinner at the museum – inside, you see. Tables and chairs set up where the pictures were. We ate and looked at the pictures. It was very nice. I didn't go to any other museums.'

'Lovely music,' I said.

'I learned a bit about classical music. Up to then my favorite music was *pata-pata*.' That was South African shanty town jive. 'But I still love *pata-pata*. It's my Mozart!'

'Did you travel much in Germany?'

'Ah, I was in Berlin, at that hotel, the Adlon. So beautiful. It costs \$300 a night.'

I resisted the gibe that the Mount Soche, a mediocre and pretentious hotel in Blantyre, cost \$250 a night, because it was where all the economists and aid people and political observers on junkets stayed.

The former ambassador said, 'One night, I was having a drink in the bar of the Adlon – my wife was with Mrs President when our president was visiting Germany. I looked up and I saw James Bond – that chap, what's his name, Pierce Brosnan. I went up to him. 'Hello. I want a few words with you.' He said, 'Yes?' I was actually talking to him! Oh, he was so nice. I had nothing to write on, so he signed the menu. My daughter was very cross. 'Why didn't you take me to see him. Papa?' Yes, that James Bond chap, I was talking to him. In Berlin!'

After the dinner party broke up and the guests left I sat with David Rubadiri, feeling so irritable it was as though I was experiencing the symptoms of an illness. I drank some more beer. The loud thumps and scrabbling of the rats in the space above the wooden ceiling had died down, had become scratchings and squealings. The large glider-winged dragonflies still drifted through the windows and seemed as large and nimble as swallows.

I did not dare approach the subject of how appalled I felt that so much effort had been wasted here, for Rubadiri was being friendly. In his expansive mood he was a romantic. He had lived through the worst years of Malawi, he had occupied high positions, he had been an exile, and he was now powerful again, running the national university, though it was millions in debt and so behind in salaries that all classes had been cancelled. Students were threatening to hold demonstrations in Zomba.

'Your children are doing so well,' he said. 'When I was in London one of them had his own TV show and the other had just published a novel. Clever chaps.'

'Thanks,' I said. Though I was flattered, I found it hard to say more. Dizziness and nausea made me laconic. My feeling of annoyance had turned into physical discomfort. I wondered if I had eaten something foul. 'Yes, they're good boys. They work very hard.'

'What I would like,' David said in an emphatic way, a little theatrical, becoming Othello-like in his demand, 'what I would like very much indeed, is for one of your children to come here for a spell.'

After what I had seen since entering Malawi through Karonga weeks before, I found the idea shocking and unacceptable, like Almighty God instructing Abraham to sacrifice Isaac. Shock gave way to incredulity and bewilderment.

'What would either of my sons do here, for goodness sake?'

'He would work, he would teach, he would be a source of ideas and inspiration.' It was the old song, but just a song.

Smiling angrily, and bent slightly because my guts ached, I said, 'But you've had plenty of those people. Years of those people. Years and years.'

'I want your son.'

What he meant as praise and, perhaps, flattery offended me. Now in his insistence he sounded like one of Herod's hatchet men, just before the Slaughter of the Innocents. *I want your son.*

Why were these murderous Biblical metaphors occurring to me? Perhaps because Malawians were such a church-going bunch.

'How many children do you have, David?'

'As you know, nine.'

'How many of them are teaching here?'

'One is in Reno, one in Baltimore, one in London, one in Kampala, another . . .' he stopped himself and looked tetchy. 'Why are you inquiring?'

'Because you're doing what everyone does – you're asking me to hand over one of my kids to teach in Malawi. But Marcel taught in India, and Louis was a teacher in Zimbabwe. They've had that experience – have yours?'

I was a bit too shrill in my reply. He took it well but he saw me as unwilling, someone no longer persuaded by the cause. He suspected that I had turned into Mr Kurtz. He was wrong. I was passionate about the cause. But I had had an epiphany: though my children would be enriched by the experience of working in Africa, nothing at all would change as a result of their being here. I thought of what my friend in Uganda had said about her American-educated children. *We wanted them here. We said, 'Come back and get your foot in the door. Get a decent job. Try to be part of the process.'*

Still trying to control my indignation I said as quietly as I could,

'What about your kids? This is their country. They could make a difference. They are the only people – the only possible people – who will ever make a difference here.'

That was my Malawian epiphany. Only Africans were capable of making a difference in Africa. All the others, donors and volunteers and bankers, however idealistic, were simply agents of subversion.

In my room that night I was struck down – cramps, nausea, griping guts, some evil gurgling in the knotted tubes of my intestines. The *chimbudzi* was down the corridor. I visited the little room every hour throughout the night. In the morning I was still weak and felt sick, for the first time since Cairo. I drowsed and slept late. No one was around the house when I woke. I rehydrated myself with a mixture of sugar and salt in water, took some pills, and drove away, downhill, past people – I almost wrote 'ragged,' I almost wrote 'barefoot', I almost wrote 'trudging.' But no, just Malawians walking along the road – people I could not help.

In Blantyre, I checked into a hotel and stayed in my room, medicating myself. I lay doubled-up for a few days and then strayed into town. What I had not noticed on my previous visit was the great number of shops and churches run by Christian evangelists – Jimmy Swaggart Ministries among them. The education system was appalling but there was no shortage of dreary hymn-singing pietists and preachers who promised people food if they handed over their souls.

I realized I was somewhat out of sympathy with this new Malawi when I saw a man on the sidewalk lying in wait for me.

Seeing me, the man smiled and frolicked ahead, flapping his arms to get my attention. He capered some more, then he crouched in front of me, blocking my path, and said, 'I am hungry. Give me money.'

I said 'No,' and stepped over him and kept walking.